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E.O. 12958: DECL: 3/25/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PINR PREL PTER KDEM TH

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: AS NEXT ROUND OF PEACE TALKS BEGINS,
SAMAK BLESSES BUT DOES NOT EMBRACE PROCESS

REF: A. BANGKOK 909 (SAMAK MISSPEAKS)

1B. CHIANG MAI 40 (PEACE DIALOGUE AWAITS SIGNAL FROM NEW GOVERNMENT)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Mike Morrow, Consul General, CG, Chiang Mai.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

11. (S/NF) Notwithstanding his inopportune public comments last week, Prime Minister Samak has reportedly blessed the next round of "secret" peace talks between the government and southern insurgents set for the coming days. Our source, a Chiang Mai-based academic involved in the peace process, reports that Samak's support for the process is tenuous and not fully formulated. A critical next step will be the naming of a new National Security Council head, expected in the coming weeks. While we are encouraged the talks are resuming, we cannot expect much forward progress in the near term unless the government puts its full weight behind the effort. End Summary.

Samak Blesses Next Round of Peace Talks

12. (S/NF) Dr. Mark Tamthai, Director of Payap University's Institute of Religion, Culture and Peace in Chiang Mai, called on Consul General March 26 to update him on the RTG's stance on the nascent southern Thailand peace process in which Tamthai has been involved. Tamthai had recently returned from Bangkok, where he traveled shortly after Prime Minister Samak surprised many on March 19 by publicly revealing - and renouncing - the RTG's secret talks with insurgents.

13. (S/NF) Consistent with a source cited in Ref A, Tamthai said Samak had misspoken out of confusion. According to what Tamthai learned in Bangkok, Samak had simultaneously received two briefing papers on the peace process: a detailed one written by "us," and a shorter piece produced by the National Intelligence Agency that contained factual errors. Samak had read only the shorter piece before he spoke to the press. Shortly afterwards, Tamthai said, one of "our" people talked to Samak and brought him around. This person reported that Samak in fact supported the peace process and wanted it to continue, though he had not formulated his thinking on what specific direction he wanted it to take.

14. (S/NF) Tamthai was relieved to have Samak's blessing, because the next round of talks would be taking place soon. In fact, Tamthai said he was leaving Thailand March 27 to go the talks. He did not reveal the location. (Note: the last round took place in Bahrain in early December; reporting from other USG channels indicates that this round will be held in Jakarta).

The RTG would again be represented in the talks by National Security Council staff, including NSC Secretary General Siripong Boonpat.

Jockeying for Samak's Ear

15. (S/NF) It is still unclear who has Samak's ear on the southern insurgency issue, Tamthai said. Various players are jockeying for influence, some pro-peace and some anti-peace. For now, Samak appears to be relying on Deputy Prime Minister Sahas Bunditkul on national security matters. Sahas was one of Samak's deputies when the latter was governor of Bangkok. Sahas has no experience on security issues, but has Samak's trust. Beyond Sahas, Samak is still figuring out whom to trust, Tamthai told us.

16. (S/NF) Tamthai has heard the NSC's Siripong would be replaced shortly after the next round of peace talks. Given the NSC's central role in the peace process, the question of who will be its new Secretary General is critical, Tamthai said. He has heard one encouraging name - a general in charge of policy planning at the Defense Ministry. But the general has made some recent political missteps that may preclude him from getting the job. Tamthai has also heard one discouraging name - a general (unnamed) who has been involved in southern issues before and had proposed deploying hit squads to rub out insurgent leaders. The NSC could swing either way, Tamthai said, because its staff includes both proponents and opponents of the peace process, but will take its cue from the new Secretary General.

Surayud Still Engaged, But Low Profile

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17. (S/NF) Another concern of Tamthai's is whether former Prime Minister Surayud would return to the King's Privy Council, where he had been before being appointed Prime Minister of the post-coup interim government in 2006. As interim PM, Surayud actively supported the peace process as chairman of the RTG's committee on the southern insurgency (with Tamthai serving as his advisor). According to Tamthai, reappointments to the Privy Council were usually immediate after a member returned from a leave of absence. He said Surayud was perplexed that this had not happened. (Note: Privy Council member Kasem Watanachai, when asked by CG during a March 22 luncheon about Surayud's reappointment prospects, replied "I don't know; it's up to the King").

18. (S/NF) In the meantime, Surayud continues as he long has to chair the Statesman Foundation, which was founded in the name of Privy Council Chairman and former Prime Minister Prem Tinsulanonda. Several of the Foundation's board members are also Privy Councilors. The Foundation has a good track record conducting educational and social programs in the south, Tamthai said. He noted that the peace process group had its office space there. Surayud remains engaged in the process, but has to keep a low profile out of respect for the new Prime Minister. RTA Commander in Chief Anupong Paojinda is a strong supporter of the process. MFA Permanent Secretary Virasakdi Futrakul is also a supporter, but recently told Tamthai he expected to be replaced soon. Regarding Foreign Minister Noppadol Pattama and Interior Minister Chalerm Yoobamrung, Tamthai said it was hard to know what to make of them and their position on the southern insurgency.

violence Cycling Upward

¶9. (S/NF) Commenting on the March 15 bombings in the south, Tamthai said both the RTG and the insurgents had two wings: those for peace, and those who oppose peace because they fear what might have to be given up to achieve it. The anti-peace forces on each side know what buttons to push to generate a new cycle of violence by the other side. Recent revelations of torture of a local imam by government security officials may have generated the March 15 bombings, Tamthai speculated.

¶10. (S/NF) Tamthai said he was aware of recent intelligence reports, "of B-minus validity," indicating that insurgents were ready to take violence to a new level by targeting Thai and foreign tourists. He intends to ask about this when he meets later this week with insurgent leaders at the next round of peace talks.

Comment

¶11. (S/NF) We are encouraged that Samak appears to support the peace process and that the next round of talks is going forward. However, we do not yet have the sense that Samak has fully embraced the process and is ready to lend his political weight to its success.

¶12. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Bangkok.
MORROW